

15 Sept 1971



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Big Brother Is Growing

If you wonder what has happened to our citizens' privacy, listen to a summary I have just completed. Incredible? One would have thought so. Impossible? One would have hoped so. Unfortunately, it is the squalid truth. Here are the ugly facts:

More than 2,600 computers are now working away -- clank, clank, clank -- in Washington. They have a full-time potential of supplying a stack of records 2,600 miles high every year. About 250,000 -- yes, 250,000 -- government employees are chiefly involved with filing the paper into cabinets. These cabinets cover 25 million cubic feet of floor space. That's more than 12 times the entire rentable floor space in the vast 102-story Empire State Building -- only for the filing cabinets. The executive branch alone has two million.

Yet the government is now installing additional data-processing computers at the astounding rate of 500 a year -- with an emphasis on piling up information about our citizens.

"PRIVACY," SAID late, great Prof. Clinton Rossiter, "is an unbreakable wall of dignity against the entire world." But start with your income tax declaration -- probably the most private, intimately revealing thing demanded of citizens. Nearly 80 million of us taxpaying peasants filed these with the Internal Revenue Service this year. The declarations started out to be inviolate. Today, largely unknown to the 80 million, that essential privacy is a mere charade.

Twenty-three federal agencies now have direct access to our citizens' income tax returns for an official total of 109 reasons.

Do not hold the IRS responsible for this. It has fought intrusions tooth and nail. But outside agencies have contrived their intrusions to the IRS's utter dismay.

WITH THE 109 REASONS available to the 23 agencies, what an outrageous opening for scattered bureaucratic insiders. And what an opportunity for crooks, pressure boys, spite artists in your neighborhood, political opponents of men in public life, business rivals and others who can quietly get your declaration by cozy relationships, bribery and other means.

The last census, which is still in the data-processing computers, was not a count of our population, as the Constitution demands. It was, instead, a systematic penetration of our privacy,

undoubtedly useful but expanded nevertheless in accord with the over-all invasion -- this worm in the American apple.

The Civil Service Commission, on inquiry, replies that, yes, it now does compile "lead information relating to possible questions" that might come up about countless people. So does the Post Office Department. So does the Department of the Interior. Ridiculously, even the elephantine Interstate Commerce Commission, to our country's shame, gets into this intrusion on such a scale that maybe the ICC should give up its true function entirely and just go into the business of building libraries for itself.

THE PENTAGON ADMITS it has dossiers on 20 million Americans outside the armed forces. Its data bank also keeps files on 7,500 organizations, if you can conceive of that many. In fact, the Pentagon admits that it processes an average 1,200 requests a day for undisclosed information.

The Justice Department lists 13,000 names of persons known to have urged violence. And there are, of course, the vital files of its investigative agency, the FBI.

The Secret Service has compiled on its own a colossal file of what it tells me are "persons of interest." These include those whose only bid for Secret Service attention is their criticism of government policies.

THE Central Intelligence Agency's personal information files are top secret -- and tremendous. The CIA has jurisdiction only abroad, not in the United States. Nevertheless, the CIA maintains secret offices in a score of U. S. cities totally unknown to our public.

Big Brother's intrusion into our American life is not new, nor is its incredible undercover, unrevealed expansion schemed and planned in the sense of a sinister design. Actually, it's a drift, like a spreading cancer is a drift. And, behind the scenes today's electronic technological advances are spreading the drift on a scale that should frighten our public out of its boots.

These advances allow Big Brother to acquire, store and use tremendous files of information. Big Brother collects on us with a correlation and speed which completely changes the potential for the invasion of privacy. And how long can this hidden prostitution of our intended government continue without wrecking every democratic concept in our democratic system?